

LEAD LIKE A LEGEND™

Leadership Development Advisors, LLC · 2929 Blackford Parkway · Lexington, KY 40509 ·
www.academyleadership.com · renners@academyleadership.com · 859.940.2732

The Other Side of Leadership Leadership Disciplines That Matter

By Rich Enners

Introduction

Abraham Lincoln has been touted as one of the best and most effective leaders of all time and there are many lessons that can be learned from his humble philosophies, values, conviction, and compassion. He was a master of influence and persuasion rather than coercion and his ability to connect with people, sometimes his adversaries, was an attribute that served him well.

The following piece was provided by Ed Ruggero, a colleague at Academy Leadership, LLC and key note speaker. Many thanks for his contribution to Lead Like a Legend™.

Character is like a tree and reputation like a shadow. The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing.

Abraham Lincoln

Lincoln's Leadership

By Ed Ruggero

I once read an award plaque that said, "Heroes come when they are needed. Great men step forward when courage seems in short supply." The award belonged to a retired Army general, but it applies to our sixteenth president as well.

By the time Abraham Lincoln took the oath of office in March 1861, seven states had seceded from the Union and more were considering it. Southerners had seized Federal arsenals and war threatened the nation. Lincoln, alerted to an assassination plot in Baltimore, passed through at night without fanfare, sneaking into his own capital. This one-term Congressman must have seemed ill

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equipped to handle the crisis, but handle it he did. Not without missteps, to be sure, but to borrow phrases from the modern parlance of leadership, Lincoln put together the best team he could find, he created and shared a clear and compelling vision, and he reaffirmed our highest values when compromise would have been easier.

Many leaders hear the advice, "Surround yourself with the best people," and interpret it as, "Surround yourself with people who think just like you do." When Lincoln looked around for the best minds, those most likely to save the nation, he found what the country needed in men who had opposed him for the Republican nomination, who thought themselves better qualified for the Presidency. Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals* tells us that Lincoln put aside jealousy and small-mindedness because these men were the best choices for the nation, and the nation was in peril. Secretary of State William Seward accepted the cabinet position because he thought he could control the rube lawyer from the frontier, and thus run the country himself. Seward soon recognized Lincoln's brilliance at forging alliances and balancing competing interests in the government and the nation, and became one of Lincoln's most ardent supporters.

As a military historian, I am drawn to the clarity of Lincoln's war aims. He knew that to defeat the rebellion, he had to destroy the South's ability to wage war; in the east that meant crushing Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Lincoln, who taught himself military strategy on-the-job, maintained this vision in the face of trials large and small, from minor setbacks to his years-long effort to find a general

who would pursue this vision with vigor.

When he finally found Ulysses Grant, by all appearances a commander who could carry out this vision, Lincoln stuck by him. In 1862 Grant's forces suffered some thirteen thousand casualties at Shiloh, Tennessee, the largest battle of the war to date. James McPherson, in *Tried By War*, his excellent book on Lincoln as Commander-in-Chief, writes, "Newspaper correspondents who descended on the field after the battle reported that Grant had been surprised on the first day because he was drunk or incompetent." The stories spread across the country and soon Lincoln was besieged by politicians demanding Grant's dismissal. Lincoln investigated, determined that the critics had their facts wrong and kept Grant in command. For this the President weathered storms of criticism, but eventually was proved right.

But it may be that Lincoln resonates now most strongly because he calls us to aspire, to live up to our stated values.

Standing near those fresh graves at
Gettysburg, Lincoln called us to aim
higher.

In November 1863, Lincoln was asked to give a few "appropriate remarks" at the dedication of the Soldier's Cemetery at Gettysburg. The featured speaker, Edward Everett, spoke for two hours while Lincoln's remarks lasted but a few minutes. Many of Lincoln's detractors—and they were legion—were incensed that this man who had sworn to uphold the Constitution instead elevated the Declaration of Independence as the nation's most important foundational document. It is in the Declaration that Lincoln finds evidence that this new nation was "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Those phrases do not appear in the Constitution, in the letter of the law Lincoln and every President before or since promised to uphold. As Gary Wills points out in *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, the President "distinguished between the Declaration as the statement of a permanent ideal and the Constitution as an early and provisional embodiment of that ideal, to be tested against it,

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kept in motion towards it."

The Constitution, as a workaday basis for law, is a changing and imperfect document, the best we can do right now, and as such it is full of compromises. Standing near those fresh graves at Gettysburg, Lincoln called us to aim higher. We compromise to achieve workable laws until we can do better, until we can draw even closer to our ideals. The highest ideals in the American canon are not the ones found in the Constitution, which, in its earliest version, tolerated slavery. Our highest ideals were enumerated by the slave-owner Thomas Jefferson when he wrote, "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights That to secure these rights governments are instituted among men, deriving their just power from the consent of the governed."

Lincoln, perhaps our wisest public philosopher, put his faith first, last and always in the people and our on-going efforts to improve how we govern ourselves. And so it is with the best leaders in any organization; they search out ways to lead better so that they can serve better.

[Ed Ruggero](#) runs The Gettysburg and Normandy Leadership Experiences, where participants walk the ground of the epic battles to learn timeless lessons on how to lead better today.

For more information about Academy Leadership, the *Leadership Boot Camp and Executive Coaching* experience, and how to become a more effective leader visit us on line at www.academyleadership.com or call me at 859.940.2732.

